Eastern Siberia
Восточная Сибирь

From the Arctic Circle in the north to the grasslands of Tuva and Buryatiya in the south, Eastern Siberia is a vast swathe of the planet, viciously cold in winter, roasting hot in summer and with a history of exile and brutality. Not everyone’s first choice of travel destination, you might think, but there is far more to this far-flung region than ice, snow, Gulags and mosquitoes.

Southern Siberia’s peak-tickled underbelly is a playground for rafters, hikers and climbers. Below the peaks impenetrable taiga gives way to steppe where timber cottages brighten timeless ramshackle villages with elaborately carved window frames. The Trans-Siberian Railway’s ribbon of steel joins the dots of Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude and Chita, where travellers step off the train to admire faded 19th-century grandeur alongside quirky socialist realism. Irkutsk is the gateway to magnificent Lake Baikal, by far the most touristed spot.

Away from the railway tracks, local Buddhist and shamanistic beliefs remain close to those of Mongolia or Tibet. Local cultures retain their own sports, traditions and languages while their ancient histories are faintly visible in mysterious kurgany (burial mounds), standing stones, petroglyphs and kameny baba (standing stone idols).

Tuvans, Buryats and Russians are a hospitable bunch, always willing to help out a traveller with food, accommodation or directions. Sadly, Siberia is not the bargain it once was and you’ll have to search out midrange meals and accommodation in big cities. Independent travel requires a few words of basic Russian, though English-speaking tour agencies are on hand in tourist hot spots to help arrange treks, Baikal cruises and temple visits.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cross the world’s deepest lake…in a taxi! Lake Baikal (p616) looks magical when frozen in March
- Observe the Buryat Buddhist revival at Ivolginsk (p650), Aginskoe (p657) or the glorious Tsugol Datsan (p658)
- Marvel at throat singing and sumo-style khuresh wrestling in the wild Tuva Republic (p597)
- Beat the rush to Olkhon Island (p632 ), an ecofriendly getaway for meditative hikes, dog-sled rides and shaman encounters
- Trek the spectacular Ergaki Mountains (p596) the stunningly remote Barguzin Valley (p637) or a section of the Great Baikal Trail (p640)
- Ride the footplate of the slow but scenic Circumbaikal Railway (p631)
History
For century after tranquil prehistoric century, Eastern Siberia’s indigenous peoples, such as the Evenki (Tungusi) north of Lake Baikal and the Kets of the Yenisey River, lived a peaceful existence in harmony with nature, harvesting the thick taiga of its game and berries, fishing the rivers and building their chums (tepees), largely oblivious of the outside world. In the south, horse-riding nomads of the Scythian culture (700 BC–AD300) thrived in what is now Tuva, leaving behind fields of standing stones and circular kurgany packed with shimmering gold. Slowly, however, Mongol-Turkic tribes began their expansion north and west, led by fearsome leaders such as Attila the Hun. The Buryats gradually headed north from Mongolia to assimilate local peoples and become the dominant ethnic group in Eastern Siberia. In the early 13th century, Chenggis (Genghis) Khaan united Mongol tribes across the region and went on to conquer China. Subsequent khans would sweep west across the steppe to sack the great cities of European Russia.

Enter the Russians. With a firm foothold in Western Siberia, small Cossack units began arriving further east in the early 17th century, establishing an ostrog (fortress) at river confluence positions such as Krasnoyarsk (1628), Ulan-Ude (1666, originally Verkhneudinsk) and Irkutsk (1651). Traders arrived from European Russia and pressed indigenous peoples into supplying sable pelts at bargain prices. Russian peasants followed in large numbers, and the original defensive forts burst like popcorn into ramshackle timber towns. Banished prisoners were the next group to make the treacherous journey from the west, and Old Believers followed after the religious rift of 1653. Other banished troublemakers included the influential Decembrists who’d failed to pull off a coup in 1825 (see p43) and political prisoners from the uprisings in Russian-occupied Poland. In the 18th century, Tibetan Buddhism arrived in Buryat settlements and was successfully superimposed onto existing shamanistic beliefs.

Siberia’s fur-based economy rapidly diversified, and the discovery of gold further encouraged colonisation. Trade with China brought considerable wealth following the treaties of Nercinsk in 1689 and Kyakhta in 1728. Lucrative tea caravans continued trudging the Siberian post road until put out of business by the Trans-Siberian Railway after 1901. The railway instantly changed the fortunes of cities, according to whether or not they were on the line, most notably Kyakhta on the border with Mongolia. Once one of the richest towns in all Russia, it plunged into provincial obscurity when the tea trade dried up. In the early 20th century the newly finished line brought another influx of Russian settlers east.

Following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, Siberia declared itself firmly in the White camp under Admiral Kolchak. After much fierce fighting along the Trans-Siberian Railway, Red forces finally took the region in 1919. Kolchak was arrested and executed in Irkutsk in 1920, and the last shots of the civil war were fired in Tuva. From 1920 to 1922 Eastern Siberia was nominally independent with the pro-Lenin Far Eastern Republic centred on Chita. As the USSR stabilised and Stalin’s infamous Gulags were created, Siberia reverted to its old role as a land of banishment. Nonetheless, unforced colonisation continued apace, especially after WWII when much heavy industry was shifted east for strategic security. Prisoners, volunteers and Soviets seeking higher pay for working in the east arrived to construct dams and transport infrastructure. The greatest of these projects was the ill-conceived Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral (BAM) railway stretching a colossal 4234km from Tayshet to Sovetskaya Gavan on the Pacific coast.

Since the end of the USSR in 1991, many towns and villages away from the economic beaten track (such as the BAM zone and along the Yenisey River) have deteriorated into virtual ghost towns. Others, such as Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk, have benefited from Russia’s new-found economic strength on the back of high oil and gas prices. Lake Baikal is attracting more tourists than ever, and Moscow has declared certain areas on its shores special economic zones slated for high-rise development. Things are better across the region than they have ever been, but Siberia’s ecologically sensitive habitats may be starting to pay the cost of this recent prosperity.

Climate
See p536 for general information on Siberia’s climate. March is great for driving across icebound Lake Baikal. Midsummer temperatures can top a sweaty 40°C, especially in the Chita